

WHAT MAKES US THINK THAT THE EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF CHILDREN WITH THE NATURAL WORLD ARE SO IMPORTANT?

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Abstract

Children disappear from external environments at speeds that would put them on top of each list of endangered species if they were members of any species of the animal kingdom.

Children grow healthier, wiser, and more content when they are more fully connected throughout their childhood to the natural environment in as many educational and recreational settings as possible. These benefits are long lasting, significant and they add up to their future welfare and contributions that they, as adults, will give to the world.

The experience of children in nature can be very small: they can help plant a garden, they can sit under a tree or listen to birds singing. Spending time in a natural environment has been shown to improve life and learning in many ways. Unfortunately, that connection with nature escapes to many of us, especially the children in the world. So, families and educators are invited to become like children again to rediscover the benefits of devoting attention to nature, to take action to strengthen children's connections with nature by making education about nature sustainable and enriched as a fully integrated part of everyday life and education of children in the world.

This call for action is intended to surpass both the principles and the research that helped us understand that experiencing and learning about nature are necessary to be able to fully understand our humanity. For children from birth onwards the discovery of their humanity and connection with nature begins very early.

Educators say they feel the pressure of standardized teaching which in turn leads to noticeably wrong effects in classes of curious young children. These activities limit the opportunities for reconnecting children with nature and acquiring knowledge about it. This raises other important issues that will be addressed in the paper.

Key words: Children, external environments, natural environment, connection with nature educators, benefits.

Introduction

Many children today find it easier to stay indoors and watch television. I worry that children do not know what they are missing. Children cannot love what they do not know. They cannot miss what they have not experienced.

It is quite possible for today's child to grow up without ever having taken a solitary walk beside a stream, or spent the hours we used to foraging for pine cones, leaves, feathers and rocks treasures more precious than store-bought ones. Today it is difficult to tear children away from the virtual world of the mall to introduce them to the real one.

Today's children are much less connected to the natural world than at another time in history. This natural connection has been replaced in various ways –greater interaction with the digital world, less unstructured outdoor play, and via growing urbanization. This decreased exposure to nature has consequences that we are just beginning to understand. The negative outcomes for children of this nature deficit include sky-rocketing rates of childhood obesity and type-two diabetes, increased psychological stress, all due to diminishing opportunities for children to engage in unstructured, creative play in the out-of-doors.

For most of human existence, children spent a great deal of their childhood's outdoors, connecting with nature on a regular basis as they explored fields, farms or wild areas close to their homes. During the last part of the twentieth century, children's environments became increasingly urbanized at a rapid rate. Gradually, children's access to the natural world has been shrinking, with alarming results. Researchers have found that a number of societal factors have resulted in a profound change in the way today's children experience the natural world.

The lives of children have radically changed over the course of the past century. No longer is free time spent outdoors inventing games with neighborhood friends or exploring the pockets of nature that existed in backyards or empty lots. A growing body of research has demonstrated that the natural world holds numerous benefits for both children and adults, alike. While it is still mysterious just how the mind, body and spirit gain from exposure to and experiences with nature, empirical evidence forces us to reexamine and rethink the lives of today's children.

Nature deficit suggests that children are suffering from a lack of exposure to and experience with the natural world around them. Historically, humans have had an intimate connection with the flora and fauna around them. Ironically, though, the modern lifestyle is deficient of meaningful contact with plants and animals in our immediate surroundings. Unfortunately, the rate at which our lifestyles have changed has far outpaced the evolution of our cognitive, psychological, and physiological hard wiring.

Conversely, exposure to nature is the means by which this connection is established and fortified. The natural environments in which children are immersed need not be areas referred to as 'wild spaces' or even the wilderness found in state or national parks. Nature, in this context, can refer to the small (if not tiny) pockets of plant and animal life that can be found in urbanized areas, the green spaces in suburban developments, or the landscapes of rural areas, essentially, nature is everywhere though we often fail to attend to its presence in our daily lives. Despite its omnipresence, our children are just not connected to the natural world.

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Research across disciplines now suggests that this disconnect has far-reaching consequences for the health and well-being of both individuals and the natural environment in which they act. Nature-deficit suggests that children are suffering from a lack of exposure to and experience with the natural world around them. Historically, humans have had an intimate

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What are the reasons for the disconnection of children with nature?

Today's youth have been dubbed "digital generation" and "indoor children." However society refers to them, this generation of children is unlike any other. Children have never been more technologically savvy than they are today. Nor has any other generation of children been more linked to the world around them, so long as that world is mediated by technology made possible by the internet. Facebook and YouTube unite them in ways we couldn't have imagined when we were ourselves children. But all of this technological interaction has come at a price. The everyday lives of children have moved indoors and inside of a handheld device. This shift in lifestyle trickles down from adults to even the youngest children. A recent article in the pedagogical journal "An educational crossroads" reported that one-third of Macedonia children aged 3 to 6 years has a television in their bedroom. The ways in which children once connected with the natural world – curious exploration, free play outdoors, experiences with nature – have quietly faded into the background, if not disappeared altogether from the lives of our plugged-in youngsters.

But the open spaces have become foreign to most. Life and all that it entails for today's children is represented by the urban. In the mind's eye of the modern parent, free time possesses many dangers. Many feel that time spent unsupervised by an adult invites 'stranger danger' and threats from within the larger community (including violence/crime and exposure to drugs). A media frenzy in the 1980s surrounding rising rates of childhood abductions sparked parents' fears that their child was unsafe playing unsupervised outdoors. This fear altered unstructured free time once spent playing on neighborhood streets as children were brought inside into private homes and play took on a new face. Even today, this fear remains exaggerated – true kidnappings are rare in the Macedonia, though incidences are highly publicized. A Macedonian survey of parents found that one in five parents keep their children indoors as much as possible out of fear of the world outside their front door (Stavreva Veselinovska, S., 2010).

A "culture of fear" has parents afraid for their children's safety. Due to "stranger danger", many children are no longer free to roam their neighborhoods or even their own yards unless accompanied by adults. Many working families can't supervise their children after school, giving rise to latchkey children who stay indoors or attend supervised afterschool activities. Furthermore, children's lives have become structured and scheduled by adults, who hold the mistaken belief that this sport or that lesson will make their children more successful adults. The culture of childhood that played outside is gone and children's everyday life has shifted to the indoors. As a result, children's direct and spontaneous contact with nature is a vanishing experience of childhood. One researcher has gone so far as to refer to this sudden shift in children's lives and their loss of free play in the outdoors as a "childhood of imprisonment" (Francis 1991). Research shows a dramatic decline in the amount of time children spend in the out-of doors.

Parents are not the only ones that have become more afraid of "nature". Children once had rich and diverse experiences in the natural world immediately surrounding their homes. Today, the media produces 15 second sound bites about close encounters between nature life and

people. The sensationalized details permeate urban legend lore which, in turn, intensifies people's perceptions of the dangers of the natural world. This is despite statistics which repeatedly show children are more likely to be harmed by objects of modernity – the gun is exponentially riskier than the spider. Summarizing the profound influence fear has had on altering the fundamental shape of childhood - “fear is the emotion that separates a developing child from the full, essential benefits of nature. Fear of traffic, of crime, of stranger-danger and of nature itself”.

Parents' role in scheduling the lives of children has also changed. Today's parents are much more involved in the minute-to-minute details of youngsters – a change that delimits the unstructured, creative play that was once a hallmark of childhood. What had previously been inextricably linked with experiences in and with the natural world, ‘free play’ no longer involves fort building, tree climbing and picking cherries or peeking under rocks next to the back steps (Stavreva Veselinovska, S., 2010), all elements that tap into a child's imagination and sense of wonder.

School Reforms

In a piece dedicated to deconstructing the ways our schools of today exacerbate the child – nature divide, points out that schools have turned up the thermostat on an already super hot technology driven Macedonian culture. As the counterbalance to the overly plugged in world, schools should “unplug” and focus their efforts on developing the health of children's inner lives by giving them experiences with the real world, as well as the symbolic world.

This federal education policy includes no direct mention of any form of environmental education. In fact, on the national level, environmental education is not even under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education in Macedonia. Matters of learning in and about the natural world are overseen by the Environmental Protection Agency, as mandated by the Environmental Education. Standardized tests that measure students' proficiency in prescribed areas (also referred to as content standards, usually focused on literacy and math) rarely include topics defined as ‘environmental science’ and are, therefore, often excluded from a school's curriculum.

Above and beyond changes in standards and curriculum, school schedules have also changed. In a recent study of public elementary schools across the nation, nearly 15 percent of upper elementary children no longer have any recess time at all during the academic day (Stavreva Veselinovska, S., 2010). Even when playtime is permitted, air quality often forces children indoors. One of the last holdouts of childhood outdoor free play is being downsized or eliminated. Contact with the world outside of the built environment has been pared down, reorganized, reconfigured, and digitized.

The positive benefits of the relation of the children with nature

In my best selling text, captures the positive benefits of nature for children noting, “healing the broken bond between our young and nature is in our self interest not only because aesthetics or justice demands it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depend upon it and so does the health of the earth” Stavreva Veselinovska, S., (2009). Some claim that the benefits human reap from being connected to the natural world are hard-wired we're evolutionarily predisposed to operating in a world filled with natural kinds. This affinity is

referred to as the biophilia hypothesis and has been forwarded by such scholars as Kellert, Wilson, and Kahn (Kahn and Kellert, 2002; Kellert and Wilson, 1993). If warranted, this claim might lead to the connection between nature and human well being, both physiologically and emotionally. When we look more closely at these possible benefits, especially for children, we find empirical evidence that supports the child - nature connection. Several significant positive outcomes for connecting children to the natural world will be discussed physical and psychological well being, inter and intrapersonal skills, and cognitive functioning.

Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills of children's

Parents' role in scheduling the lives of children has also changed. Today's parents are much more involved in the minute-to-minute details of youngsters a change that delimits the unstructured, creative play that was once a hallmark of childhood (Chamberlin, 2006). The lives of today's children are complex. They're much more connected with the global community, yet this complexity demands greater skills in terms of both inter- and intrapersonal relations. And while the academic world has long been interested in investigating the social and emotional lives of children, it only recently took up the issue how the natural world might influence children's socio-emotional wellbeing. Emerging evidence demonstrates a link between experiences in the natural world and children's conflict resolution skills, their motivation and self efficacy.

Macedonia's children in nature campaign

All Macedonia children will be inspired to actively and creatively engage with and appreciate the natural environment. Such is the vision statement of the Macedonia children in nature, a campaign for action, a state wide initiative of Macedonia parks. A primary goal of the Campaign is to make the child - nature connection issue accessible to all segments of Macedonia society. The initiative will coordinate and promote State Park programs that connect children with nature, provide resources to raise awareness and understanding of the critical need for this effort, work with partners to facilitate regional collaborations, and work directly with communities to bolster capacity and promote sustainability of efforts. The "Macedonia children's outdoor bill of rights" is one of the campaign's initiatives, outlining a list of activities and corroborating research that child should experience before the age of 14. The goal of the campaign is to focus on awareness and action, and to expand the scope and number of entities that can play an important role in overcoming barriers and/or providing direct services. Macedonia State Parks will also develop a best-practices evaluation mechanism to promote and assess programmatic outcomes at both the local and state-wide levels. By engaging diverse partners in the children in nature campaign, Macedonia state parks aims to raise awareness of the 'children in nature' issue at all levels of Macedonia society and to facilitate the actions necessary to bring about change.

Summary

Early experiences with the natural world have also been positively linked with the sense of wonder. This way of knowing, if recognized and honored, can serve as a lifelong source of joy and enrichment, as well as an impetus, or motivation, for further learning. Sadly, the ability to experience the world...as a source of wonder tends to diminish over time. This seems to be especially true in Western cultures, where for the sake of objective understandings: children are

encouraged to focus their learning on cognitive models, rather than on first-hand investigations of the natural environment.

Without continuous hands on experience, it is impossible for children to acquire a deep intuitive understanding of the natural world that is the foundation of sustainable development. A critical aspect of the present day crisis in education is that children are becoming separated from daily experience of the natural world.”

How then, can parents and teachers help children develop a love for the natural world in a more intentional and appropriate way?

Maria Montessori in her book, *To Educate the Human Potential*, says that only when the child is able to identify its own center with the center of the universe does education really begin. Such a comprehensive context enables “the mind of the child to become centered, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge.” The child needs to build a foundation of how all things are related and how the relationship of things to one another is so close that “no matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe.”

Children need to hear the “voices of the rivers, the mountains, the sea, the trees, the meadows,” water fountains, dirt, and all the other innumerable mysteries of the earth available to them in their native and natural locales. The purpose of this paper is to explore how we can support the beginning of this important journey in a child’s life, as we plan learning activities throughout the day and implement our curricula for every child.

We have a unique opportunity to infuse young children with an appreciation for and enjoyment of the natural world, to connect them to nature, and to immerse them in the mysteries of the great outdoors. The childhood obesity crisis has brought much needed attention to the importance of outdoor physical activity in the lives of young children, but little focus has been given to the outdoors as a learning environment on par with the indoor environment.

Never before in history have children been...so out of touch with the natural world. Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder. He helps us to see what is so apparent - that this generation of children is in danger of being completely detached from nature and missing the value of experiences found in being outdoors.

All of us can look at our outdoor environments through a new lens and begin to assess our outdoor play areas and activities and how they support children’s learning and development:

- How much time do children spend outside each day?
- What types of activities are provided outdoors to engage children in learning and development?
- What is the quality of play among children when they play outdoors?
- How is the outdoor environment designed?
- Are there enough “reasonable risks” to challenge children sufficiently?
- Are there recognizable “learning centers” for children’s learning and development?
- Are outdoor environments naturalized? Are children able to experience changing seasons on their playground?
- How many observations for child assessment are done outside?
- Are teachers actively engaged with children in the outdoor environment?
- Do lesson plans reflect multiple learning opportunities in the outdoors for individualized child goals?

Everything you do inside can be done outside. But the opposite is not true. There are many activities that can be offered outside that cannot be offered inside. Let us all commit to moving our children outside and connecting them with the naturalized world.

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